

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1972)
Heft: 1647

Artikel: The story of the "S.B.B."
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688379>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 20.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

should be given on principle, even if in practice this would be used once every ten years. He said that few members of the Swiss Colony in France felt the need for voting rights with the same urgency as expressed by the speaker from Lyon earlier during the Plenary Assembly.

OUTING TO INTERLAKEN

On Sunday morning we journeyed to Thun on a special train. A modern boat carried us along the northern side of the lake towards Interlaken. The weather was mild but misty, and it was impossible to see the Alps. The surface of the lake was as smooth as a mirror. Our boat glided towards the canal that connects with Interlaken as a yodeling group performed in the main lounge of the lower deck. When the hundreds of Swiss abroad had disembarked from the boat, a small drizzle began falling on Interlaken. The long procession walked along the wet streets of the resort to its Kursaal, where long rows of tables had been prepared for their lunch.

The patrons from abroad lingered over coffee amid the indistinct sound of a folk group. A curtain of rain could be seen across the vast windows of the hall and all hope of taking the walk for which there was ample time in the programme was in vain. Instead we witnessed a number of personal performances by volunteers. The Secretariat of the Swiss abroad had asked for anyone who felt endowed with entertaining gifts put to them to the enjoyment of others. A nurse from the Tessin residing in Paris for over fifteen years appeared on the stage and read a poem in Romansch with beautiful inflexions but which few people could understand. Then a Swiss lady from our London colony, Miss Erika Ruettimann, read a lengthy poem which the bad acoustics prevented people in the back rows from enjoying. A corpulent woman from Germany climbed on stage and sang a *Lieder* with piano accompaniment. Its unending refrains somewhat strained the concentration of her audience and she sang for ages amid a general clatter of chairs and bustle of conversations. Nevertheless, she was loudly applauded.

The last performer was a fat boisterous man who also came from Germany. He was garbed in a custom officer's uniform and from his gait one gathered that his number was going to be a funny one. Unfortunately, his plump humour didn't come off and its delivery also extended beyond the reasonable bounds of time. The attention waned and the attendance more or less cut short his performance with a premature burst of applause.

The folk group then gave a display of dances, flag-throwing and whip-

banging exercises, the last of which was original and quite impressive.

We were then told by the organisers that coaches had been found to bring us back to the station because of the pouring rain. There followed a long but good-humoured wait at the entrance of the Kursaal as the two hired coaches evacuated our colourful

crowd back to the station, whence we boarded a special train that brought us back to Berne at about half-past five.

The parting of friends beneath the steel pillars of Berne station marked the end of a memorable Assembly which received wide attention from all the Swiss news media.

THE STORY OF THE "S.B.B."

A Railway for Spanish Rolls?

The term *Spanisch-Brötli-Bahn* ("Spanish roll railway") is familiar to every child in German-speaking Switzerland. It is applied to any of the antediluvian trains that have been preserved from earlier days of railway romance and are still sent puffing and rattling along the track on special occasions. What "Spanish rolls" were, what they tasted like and where the term came from—these things have long been forgotten by the general public.

The original "Spanish roll railway" was the first to be constructed in Switzerland. It ran from Zurich to Baden and took up service 125 years ago. Spanish rolls were a speciality of Baden bakers which were very popular on the breakfast tables of Zurich's aristocracy. Up to that time they had been fetched from the famous watering-place by long-suffering servants, who had to plod for several hours through the night. The railway was thus their deliverance: the Spanish rolls were loaded on to the early train and were still warm when they reached Zurich. A railway, then, for Spanish rolls—this sort of idyll is often taken today to characterise the early days of the Swiss railways. The reality was quite different: an unceasing struggle on the part of their progressive and farsighted supporters against diehard traditions, narrow-minded regionalism and proverbial Swiss frugality. In the early forties of the nineteenth century, when the railway question first came up for discussion in Switzerland, other countries already possessed extensive rail networks: in Germany over 2,000 kilometres of track was in use, in France, some 800 km, and in Great Britain and Ireland no less than 4,000 km, or 2,500 miles. Various lines had already reached the Swiss frontier: that from Strasbourg and Karlsruhe ended at Basle, that from Lyons at Geneva, while others terminated in the Lake of Constance region. The circles that were intent on speeding

up the construction of Swiss railways, more particularly industrialists and tradesmen from Zurich, naturally had much more in view than a short local line to transport Spanish rolls from Baden. They were planning a line from Zurich to Basle that would connect up to the European networks and could be extended in the opposite direction to Chur, the starting point of the pass roads to the south: they were even thinking of an Alpine railway to Italy. Ten years before a single track was laid, one of the constants of future Swiss rail policy had already come into play: the need, the compulsion, to contrive a passage through the Alps.

A petition submitted by the Zurich Chamber of Commerce to the cantonal authorities on 16th May, 1836, opened up European perspectives: "... no country is better equipped to mediate successfully and efficiently, by way of railway connections, between North and South, between East and West, than Switzerland is". At the same time, the petition demanded "... that Switzerland should not lag behind unless she wishes to be pushed aside completely; therefore she must be the first to obtain control of these connections between the North and the South." Such words strike a surprisingly modern note.

The time, however, was not yet ripe. The section Zurich-Baden long remained the only one completed. For years no further construction took place, while fierce battles raged over cantonal interests. It was only in 1854, seven years after the first, that the second Swiss railway line was opened, and it was not a continuation of the "Spanish roll railway" but the Basle-Liestal section of the Hauenstein railway, which was clearly aiming at the Gotthard and was thus a competitor for the Zurich project based on a crossing of the Splügen or Lucomagno Passes in the Grisons. The Gotthard project was to triumph, but the clash of opinions about tunnels through the Alps continues to this day.

State or Private Railways?

The parliament of the Swiss Confederation, which had been transformed in 1848 from a league of small states to a federal republic, finally decided to leave the construction of railways to private initiative. Feverish activity at once began, and within ten years 1000 kilometres of tracks had been laid. By the middle of the seventies only Great Britain and Belgium had denser railway networks than Switzerland. There were 6 kilometres of tracks for every 100 square kilometres of land, and 77 metres per hundred inhabitants. (Up to date the density of the network has roughly doubled in the frequency of trains Switzerland leads the rest of Europe by a clear margin and is second in the world only to Japan.) Since private railway companies were guided more by speculative considerations than by the interests of the public, and since they were not spared grave financial setbacks, the demand for state control, which had never ceased to find expression, gradually became more imperious. A plebiscite at last settled the issue in favour of the big private railways by the state. They

were united in 1902 under the new name of "Swiss Federal Railways". Today they comprise 2,913 kilometres or 1,810 miles of lines, but private railways not very far short of this figure are still in existence. Two of the more important of the latter are, for instance, the Berne-Lötschberg-Simplon line, which is of international significance, and Rhaetian Railways, which together with the Furka-Oberalp and the Viège-Zermatt lines constitute Europe's largest continuous narrow-gauge network.

Europe on Rails

The very first Swiss railway planners thought in European terms and recognised a passage through the Alps as a task which Switzerland had to face. The construction of the Gotthard line would not have been possible, however, without help from the neighbouring countries. The key to other large European rail projects also lay in Switzerland; an Orient line from Paris to Constantinople was planned to pass through the Engadine

in the seventies, but was later routed through the Simplon, the longest of the Alpine tunnels.

The interdependence of the countries of Europe was underlined in the years following the First World War, when the coal shortage brought Swiss rail transport almost to a standstill. This experience provided the impulse needed for rapid and complete electrification, which was soon to serve as a model and a stimulus for other European railways. After the First World War Swiss Federal Railways invited Europe's railwaymen from both sides to the conference table, and they have since been responsible for organising the European timetable conference which takes place every two years and at which the timetables of international trains are brought into line with each other regardless of all national and ideological frontiers. An impressive symbol of the idea of "Europe on rails" are the up-to-date TEE (Trans-Europ-Express) trains with their sounding names, which ensure speedy connections between the cities of Europe. It is not by accident that eleven, or nearly one-third of these trains run either in or across Switzerland.

ACME TRANSPORT CO., LTD.

The Specialists in Transports to and from The Continent

CITY WALL HOUSE

84-89 CHISWELL STREET, LONDON, E.C.1

Cables: **Acmetrans London EC1.**

Telex: 884005

Phone: 01-606 5721

ALSO AT: LONDON AIRPORT, MANCHESTER AND HARWICH

We Operate Direct Train Ferry and Container Services
